

Politics of Location: A View of Theatrical Contemporaneity in India

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Scholarship on Indian theatre has focused on colonial theatrical culture, theatre's allegiance to the national project, forms of institutionalization and, most crucially, critiquing the urban relationship to folk and traditional performance. There has been some investigation of avant-garde practices of women theatre-makers since the 1990s that deviate from modernist paradigms to propose a new language for theatre, while underlining the subjective position of the maker as unstable, volatile and radical. The critique of the glaring exclusion of theatre from official cultural discourse has also occupied theatre scholars who trace back the genealogy of contemporary practice to the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA), early-modern forms like Parsi theatre and its regional variants. And equally, the view of folk forms as disembodied and appropriable artefacts, celebrated as markers of authentic "Indian" identity, has been amply contested by scholars and theatre-makers alike.

Despite this broad scope of theatre scholarship, the discourse on state interventions in culture has oscillated largely between the foundational debate about the need for a national cultural policy, and what the limitations or dangers of instituting one could be. What appears as a visible gap therefore, is the dynamics between existing institutional frameworks and contemporary practice, i.e. the ways in which implicit state policies and existing material conditions of theatre impact theatre practice. This essay attempts to examine select contemporary practices that ensue productively from and exist in a complex relationship with state policies, and that function outside, even despite, established paradigms of theatre production in terms of spaces of performance, modes of spectatorship, what constitutes "theatre" and

“work” in the theatre. The relationship these practices generate between audiences and performers is also explored.

To examine the material conditions within which this theatre is conceived, produced, performed and consumed, I critically survey five theatre productions/projects broadly located outside institutional frames and allocated edifices. I also reflect on the aesthetic shifts of structure and form that this assemblage proposes. It is my contention that each of these performances employs, as a signifying practice, a “politics of location” that moves away from hegemonic modes of cultural production, focusing rather on local knowledge and favouring situatedness of knowledge production in theatre. Each of the practices discussed here is situated in a regional site and engages strategically with its specific material and sociopolitical environment.

Understood as a “view from elsewhere”, these practices foreground the ideological and social positions that are being reinforced and contested in contemporary theatre practice. Location is, therefore, not only crucial to but also inseparable from and constitutive of this theatre. The practices discussed here reveal significant ways in which emerging formats of presentation and choice of performance spaces cultivate and engage active audiences, in turn impacting notions of paid work and livelihood in theatre. In so doing they propose a view of theatrical contemporaneity that responds productively to the state’s restrictive cultural policies and shrinking resource allocation that increasingly dismantle social frameworks.

In the first section of this essay, I broadly map key institutional positions and the schemes of the Sangeet Natak Akademi (SNA) in its formative years, to diagnose the current situation and mark its continuities with and shifts from the past. I do so to make the case for cultural policy in theatre as a de facto formation, i.e. not as an explicitly written document but dispersed across various documents emerging from seminars, consultations and

official positions of SNA, its budgetary allocations, schemes and review reports. The second section analyses the five selected theatre works that employ “politics of location” to negotiate the gaps in theatre policy, and the conclusion summarizes the material shifts brought about by these projects, underlining their unique locations as crucial to destabilizing notions of theatrical centres and peripheries.

Mapping Cultural Policy Discourse and Gaps

The paradigm of institution-building in newly independent India sought to place culture as the kernel of democratic policies, to give shape to a “national culture” and to institutionalize it, as Geeta Kapur points out, “precisely to carry out the overall mandate of modernization.”ⁱ The beginnings of a policy framework in performing arts can be traced back to the setting up of central cultural institutions, particularly SNA (established in 1953) and the allied political and administrative processes that brought culture into the ambit of state control, becoming part of the “new framework of institutions that embodied the spirit of progress, or, its synonym, modernity”.ⁱⁱ SNA has since been instrumental in not only defining the contours of an authentic Indian theatrical future, but more crucially, as Anita Cherian reminds us, in crafting a theatrical past with its careful exclusions of certain theatrical expressions and movements.ⁱⁱⁱ Notably, despite the postcolonial urge to explore an “Indian” idiom in all fields of cultural practice, there has not been any comprehensive policy enactment in Parliament to recognize and address the diversity of existing cultural practices. Despite the absence of a clearly written cultural policy, an amorphous policy exists in theatre. The gist of this within the context of a welfare state concerns the arms-length approach of the state that functions through SNA that has been the main recipient of funding and government directives in performing arts. The historical narrative of this policy needs to be constructed from documents

emerging from seminars, consultations and the official positions of SNA, its budgetary allocations, schemes and review reports.

The discussions and recommendations of the First Drama Seminar (1956)^{iv} are instructive in understanding the earliest role of the state as the prime patron of the arts and processes of revival, restructuring and recognition of select practices. The rationale of state patronage, primarily to classical and Sanskrit forms of theatre and dance, and residually to folk forms since the 1960s, reveals perceived notions of tradition and authenticity that were manifested in dramatic texts and theatre productions anchored to the project of nation-building and national identity. The decades of the '60s and '70s offer a more complex and contradictory view of the role of state in theatre. On the one hand, principles of equity and access based on notions of social inclusion were articulated vigorously while on the other, indigenizing trends in theatre through idealizing folk forms were intended at undoing the effects of “Western” influence. This was formalized in the concrete policies of SNA through state-sponsored conferences, seminars and festivals. The young urban theatre practitioner’s “return to roots” was celebrated and incentivized, requiring folk theatre traditions to have some bearing on theatre productions. The first ever review of the three cultural academies and NSD—the Homi Bhabha Committee Report, 1964^v— underscored issues of functional autonomy, inclusion of artists in the organizational structure, notions of accountability and the need for critical appraisal of institutional structures. The legacy of the cultural policy of these formative years brings into relief a slow and incomplete process of decentralization of state patronage. This is evident in the uneven spread of training institutions at state/regional levels and misdistribution of skills. Most crucially, the processes of cultural engineering launched by the state have been unable to secure for practitioners sustainable liveli-

hoods in/from the theatre.

Deploying a Politics of Location: Emerging Trends in Theatre Practice

I. Delhi-based theatre-maker, activist and walker, Mallika Taneja's single-actor performance piece *Thoda Dhyaan Se (TDS/Be Careful)* was conceived in 2013 in the aftermath of the Mumbai Shakti Mill rape case. Developing from an 8-minute-long embodied response to the incident, *TDS* has evolved into a 30-minute-long intimate theatre piece, still remaining, in most part, a work in progress. Each successive performance throws up newer challenges of context, form and content. It has since been performed in a variety of spaces from proscenium stages to classrooms and private living-rooms using found furniture and basic lights. Calling it a "piece", a "knee-jerk", rather than a production or play, Mallika signals a shift in the perception of the theatre event that embodies the vulnerability and innocence of the maker and her theatrical choices. The actor begins silently, stripping down every garment from her body. Standing bare in her "essential femaleness", she looks at each audience member patiently, engaging and interrogating our gaze.

"If you don't want any trouble, don't invite it!" she states abruptly, most convincingly, before embarking upon a breathless string of advice and the lopsided rationale that women have to be "careful" in order to be safe. This, while she relentlessly layers onto her naked body pieces of garments worn one on top of the other in an absurd and humorous fashion. Finishing off with a helmet over her head, covered from head to toe, she is a bundle of tightly packed clothes, ready to head out! The piece is as much a provocation to our senses as it is to our deeply entrenched sequel of gender stereotyping and objectification of women's bodies, implicating invisible perpetrators and the passive language of victim

blaming and shaming. The naked body is seen and understood in relation to the equal and opposite complexity of clothing. The body operates as text in its own right and is not simply a means of illustrating the spoken word. It is a work of great intimacy and self-reflection, rupturing our very sense of intimacy in performance, making us wonder what it means to look and to be looked at—for the actor’s body in the theatre and for women’s bodies outside.

Locating her work in alternative performance spaces in Delhi and outside the theatrical centres within India—particularly state-funded theatre festivals or popular performance venues in metropolitan cities—has given her a small, yet supportive audience who values her work. On the other hand, it is through travelling to and performing at international theatre festivals for the last two years^{vi} that the piece developed into what she calls “legitimate work” in the theatre, implying that the work is paid, securing her access to financial means and fundraising circuits. Mallika’s choices and *TDS*’s production itinerary suggest a growing connectedness between the local and the global through international performance networks, bypassing the central and the national altogether. Mobility through transnational networks ensures sustenance to artists; continued visibility globally and recognition in the form of awards often translate into increased relevance of their work locally.

II. The multilingual performance project, *Talatum* (December 2016), conceptualized and directed by Abhilash Pillai, presents a retelling of Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* in a circus tent, using the paraphernalia of traditional circus. As a collaboration between circus and theatre artists from Kerala, Meghalaya, Delhi, Manipur and Mumbai, it brings indigenous performance practices, both classical and folk, into rigorous conversation with the Shakespearean classic, while challenging traditional spectatorship in both theatre and circus. The show was

rehearsed in Kerala, a location that is connected to the circus not only by its cultural landscape, i.e. the braided histories of circus^{viii} and indigenous performance traditions like Kalari-payattu and Theyyam but also by its natural landscape, particularly the sea that provides the edifice and key motif of many folktales of the region. Commissioned by Serendipity Arts Festival, Goa and performed at SAG grounds in Panjim, the performance built on the cultural capital of Shakespeare by performing *The Tempest* in the year commemorating the 400th death anniversary of the bard.

A massive circus tent, the traditional Big Top, reminiscent of the grand old itinerant circus, is built with audience seating especially engineered to yield greater level of comfort than its traditional dugout seating. The central scenographic element is a humungous papier-mâché puppet of Sycorax, the silent witch from *The Tempest*, adorned by a headdress in traditional circus colours. Her arms are spread out and breasts swollen, prefiguring the birth of Caliban. Her legs circumscribe the space of the circus ring. A curtain is placed below her chest for the entry and exit of performers. There are other sculptural objects—an inflated balloon puppet of baby Caliban, a life-like wooden puppet of the young Miranda, a cardboard model of a ship, a restored dinghy lifted vertically using circus pulley and ropes. They define the performance's negotiation between the dramatic text, inflected through the use of audio-visual elements, digital projections and circus items—fire-breathing, juggling, aerial silks, trapeze, unicycling and hooping—to produce a unique multisensory experience. In its unruly use of material, scale and physical possibilities, the performance is a scenographic spectacle that generates a plethora of feelings far exceeding the refined ideals of dramatic theatre.

Talatum is part of a broader project called the “Pioneer Palace”, conceived by

Pillai in 2015 with a view to developing a national culture of circus arts through training and regular circus shows. The project conceptualizes a framework for generating sustainable modes of livelihood through circus and allied physical arts. Historically, the tradition of circus arts in India sits alongside the old subaltern bazaar cultures. It gained its modern identity through an accretion of cultural borrowings, not only from the West but also from deeply-rooted indigenous traditions of Kerala like Kalaripayattu, Theyyam and Mudiyyett, deeply problematizing notions of authenticity and homogeneity in performance. The institutionalizing tendencies of state policies render invisible the histories of hybrid forms such as circus, veiling their modern development, problems of livelihood and possibilities of artistic and social development for its practitioners. Conceived as a travelling show, *Talatum* foregrounds the historic relationship between government policies and popular forms that have remained outside state funding but within the ambit of state control, often seen only as sites of transgression and therefore inviting neglect and apathy. The circus artist, often denied the position of a skilled performer, yet pitied and commodified, continues to fight social stigmatization, legal prohibition and loss of livelihood. In its attempt to revitalize circus, *Talatum* aligns itself with similar attempts in North America and Australia that manifest the potential of performance, spectacle and modern physical training to contemporize subaltern physical arts, encouraging the return of both practitioners and audiences back into the circus tent.

III. A key site for unpacking theatre’s relationship with wider social and cultural phenomena is located in practice that emanates from and is performed for constituencies defined in terms of a “community”, reflecting shared knowledge and social realities. *Theatre Outreach Unit: Theatre Enhancing the Livelihoods of Parishat Artists*, initiated by the Department of Theatre Arts, University of Hyderabad (HCU), Telangana (2012–15) and funded by Sri Ratan Tata Trust & Navajbai Ratan Tata Trust, was a unique theatre training and management project aimed to engage with the material conditions, aesthetic and conceptual redundancies facing Telugu theatre. The project identified Parishat theatre^{viii} as the bearer of the continued tradition of modern Telugu social drama, largely funded and managed by associations of amateur and semi-professional theatre practitioners of the region. Parishat events spread across the state have historically sustained community participation in Telugu theatre.

The project located “community” in theatre both on and off stage. To expand the artistic repertoire of the theatre community training workshops were conducted in five regions—Vijayawada, Hyderabad, Nandyal, Kakinada and Nizamabad. Viewing the community beyond the stage and in its social context, the project broached enhancing livelihoods in theatre by broadening entrepreneurial and soft skills of artists and engaging new and young audiences, tying together theatre practitioners with their audiences and the larger social system. The project also liaised between local policy-implementing institutions and their beneficiaries by conducting theatre management workshops for existing groups in marketing, fundraising and publicity, as well as assisting them in registration in state records, maintaining audit statements and applying for grants under government schemes.

As an adaptation of the itinerant repertory model of the popular theatre tradition, an 8-month-long artists-in-residency programme was launched with a group of 15 actors who travelled and performed extensively throughout the region. They were paid a monthly salary for the duration of the residency, during which they underwent rigorous training in modern acting skills, advanced design, lighting and stage-craft techniques. *Miss Meena*, the first of the two productions, is an adaptation of Swiss-German playwright Friedrich Durrenmatt's *The Visit* directed by Indla Chandrashekhar. The second production, *Adventures of Chinnari*, directed by Sheikh John Basheer, is a play for children and young audiences based on a Chinese folktale infused with local imaginaries. Both productions explore innovative presentation formats of fast-paced action and energetic storytelling in a minimalist setting. As the focus is on empowering the artists to travel, perform and manage shows by themselves, the set pieces and props are easy and light-weight to enable quick set-up and strike after each show.

The project enabled the two young Telugu theatre directors, also graduates of the Department of Theatre Arts, HCU, to bring forth experiences gained in a formal theatre institution to work in local contexts, telling the stories that emanate from and resonate with the community. This is the reason that while both shows ran on a professional repertory model generating revenues through ticket sales, they also received support from local audiences, often in the form of donations and logistical assistance. By the end of 2017, both the productions had travelled widely across Andhra Pradesh and staged more than 100 shows, performing in conventional theatre venues and other makeshift performance spaces.

IV. Neelam Mansingh Chowdhry's performance iterations based on Manto's short stories

are a way of negotiating the historical narration of an emerging nation with the contemporary realities of destitution, displacement and gender violence. Just as Manto's narratives reflect his predilection for social outcasts to explore the subject of violence, Mansingh's feminist re-narration of his stories articulates a view from down under to reflect on the communal national legacies being re-rehearsed in present times. Three theatre productions made each year since 2015 are iterations, similar yet distinct from each other, occupying different locations and engaging distinct constituencies. While *Bitter Fruit* (2015) and *Naked Voices* (2016) were both devised with final-year students of NSD, *Dark Borders* (2017) was conceived out of a 4-month-long training workshop Mansingh conducted for amateur actors of Chandigarh at the behest of the city administration that also provided a modicum of funding for the exercise. All three productions are retellings of several short stories by Manto intermixed with images, characters and text from his larger repertoire. In the process, the texts are remade each time and form what she calls "free flowing embodied texts", that belie any loyalty to the writer's word or interpretation, reclaimed and re-signified through her playful use of theatrical materials and bodies on stage. The curtness of expression and the fragmentary form of these productions speaks to the impossibility of representation of traumatic experiences while still in their grip or in their immediate aftermath.

While the context of training underlies all three productions, there is an unmistakable difference between institutional practice that rests on generous state support and that which negotiates limited funding, constraints of space and pressures of translating training processes into professionally successful productions. Despite these odds, *Dark Borders* premiered at Chandigarh's iconic Rock Garden and has since travelled to major theatre festivals in Delhi, Jaipur, Hyderabad and Goa, eventually sustaining a professional run. This production stands apart from the oeuvre of Mansingh in that it is for the first time that she has

worked with local, largely untrained, actors of her city. It is noteworthy that her professional practice and her stature as an important theatre director in India underlines a social position that is both centred and decentred. Despite her vast experience in theatre institutions and mobility to national-international theatre festivals, she locates herself away from the urban centres of theatrical practice, running a theatre company that despite the repertory grants from the Ministry of Culture often struggles to make enough money to sustain the quality of its theatre productions and ensure a minimum livelihood to its artists. Despite the departures that this production makes with respect to its geographical and symbolic location, it builds on notions of repetition and reiteration of performance aesthetics and style of the maker, text(s) in question and dispersed ownership of creative work.

V. A large-scale outdoor performance spectacle, *Dark Things* uses scenography, music and action to explore the human cost of migration and forced exile of people brought about by shifts in political and fiscal currents as global capitalism ebbs and flows. Developed and performed as part of the course curriculum in music performance at Ambedkar University, Delhi (AUD) and performed by current and graduate students of its performance studies programme, the project used artistic collaboration and co-creation to train students in contemporary performance-making. There is a deliberate fusing of choreographed action, object, image and movement, playing with live and recorded music to develop a performance vocabulary that translates the “Oratorio” by the South African writer Ari Sitas into song, speech and poetry. Contemporary images of work and modern forms of slavery are woven together by the young dramaturg Purav Goswami, and the piece has been assembled by Anuradha Kapur and Deepan Sivaraman. The music, by the Kerala-based composer Chandran Veyattummal, South African guitarist Reza Khota and the singer and music scholar Sumangala

Damodaran, spans disparate Afro-Asian tonalities. Funded and performed as a part of collaborative research work between AUD and UCT (University of Cape Town) faculty on Afro-Asia linkages in creative work, *Dark Things* splits open the construction of the other in political rhetoric today—the precarious bodies of the refugee, migrant labourer, factory worker, sewage cleaner and bone collector. There is no story or character—only vignettes, sounds and objects that evoke contemporary linkages between capital, labour, product and the human catastrophes they unleash. Toiling-moiling bodies of actors, musicians, crane-operator, tempo-driver and balloon-man narrate a range of experiences of work and displacement, crossing borders of all kinds, acquiring identities that are palimpsestic, bearing the mark of each location that has been traversed.

Dark Things throws up crucial questions about the tenacity of theatre and performance curricula to critically examine the global knowledge flows in the fast-transforming public university increasingly under pressure from forces of neoliberal capitalism. The question that must be asked constantly with regard to skill-based theatre training and practice, particularly in the public university, is the extent to which it can critically examine and open up the ideological role played by the university in its service of the state and the market, while at the same time resisting the attraction of performance/theatre to be co-opted into the cultural marketplace as a product.

Conclusion

The projects discussed here do not fit programmatically within the categorizations and spaces defined by institutional paradigms of theatre. Each of them is located in local/regional/community-specific contexts, reflecting positions and anxieties that disperse centrifugally and become signs of an emerging contemporaneity. These productions break away from the

grand narratives of nation-building, national histories and uniform notions of identity in favour of specific yet multiple voices reflecting multiple subjects and realities. The theatrical narratives at play are localized, often even personalized and fragmentary, resisting any closure or fixity. As projects that make crucial cultural-political interventions, they consciously reach towards alternative and forgotten histories and traditions in performance. There is a recognizable desire to move away from fixed binaries of theatre/performance, classical/popular, modern/traditional, text/body in favour of a multidisciplinary aesthetics that combines storytelling with spectacle, multimedia technology, industrial objects, local histories, movement and choreography, aural and textual reflections. The paradigm of “pretence” in theatre is unsettled as we experience more reality, more materiality on stage.

Most of these practices work laterally to dismantle existing power structures in theatre through collective production, dispersed ownership and collaboration. They also propose modes of spectatorship that are made active through participatory environments or spaces of engagement that are inclusive and sustainable. Most crucially, questions of livelihood, skill development and training are relocated in specific geographic and metaphorical contexts and linked socioculturally to audiences. Each of these locations is crucial to fulfilling our desires for decentring and destabilizing notions of theatrical centres and peripheries.

CAPTIONS

1a and 1b. *Thoda Dhyaan Se* (TDS/Be Careful), directed by Mallika Taneja, 2013. COURTESY Mallika Taneja.

2. *Talatum*—The Circus, directed by Abhilash Pillai, 2016. COURTESY Abhilash Pillai.

3. *Miss Meena*, directed by Indla Chandrashekhar, 2013. COURTESY Indla Chandrashekhar.

4. *Adventures of Chinnari*, directed by Sheikh John Basheer, 2013. COURTESY Sheikh John Basheer.

5. *Bitter Fruit*, directed by Neelam Mansingh Chowdhry, DATE. COURTESY Neelam Mansingh Chowdhry.

6. *Dark Borders*, directed by Neelam Mansingh Chowdhry, 2017. COURTESY Neelam Mansingh Chowdhry.

7a and 7b. *Dark Things*, directed by Anuradha Kapur and Deepan Sivaraman, 2018. COURTESY Deepan Sivaraman.

NOTES

ⁱ Geeta Kapur, *When was Modernism: Essays on Contemporary Cultural Practice in India*, New Delhi: Tulika, 2000, p. 202.

ⁱⁱ Partha Chatterjee, *Empire and Nation: Selected Essays*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2010, p. 53.

ⁱⁱⁱ Anita Cheria, “Institutional Maneuvers, Nationalizing Performance, Delineating Genre: Reading the Sangeet Natak Akademi Reports 1953–1959”, *Third Frame: Literature, Culture, and Society*, Vol. 2, No. 3, 2009, pp. 32–60.

^{iv} The recommendations included repealing the Dramatic Performances Act, 1876 and exemption of all theatre from entertainment tax; construction of theatres, financial support to commercial theatre companies and amateur groups; creation of NSD as a publicly subsidized theatre training institution; establishing a system of awards and recognition for existing institutions; publication, preservation and documentation of folk and traditional theatre; and funding theatre festivals to showcase regional theatre. (Sangeet Natak Akademi’s (SNA) published proceedings of the 1956 Drama Seminar)

^v Unpublished report of the Homi Bhabha Committee, 1964 on improving the functioning of the Akademies and ICCR, focussing particularly on ways to preserve the autonomy of the Akademi.

^{vi} Zurich Theatre Spektakel, Switzerland (2015), ITFOK (2016), Alchemy Festival, UK (2016), La Villette, France (2016), Colombo Dance Festival (2016), TPAM-Yokohama, Tokyo (2017), Women of World Festival, Melbourne (2017) and Recontres Choreo-graphique, Paris (2017). In 2015, she was awarded the ZKB Acknowledgement Prize at the Zurich Theatre Spektakel.

^{vii} The emergence of circus as commercialized entertainment and leisure since the early 20th century owes in large part to the Malabar region in Kerala, particularly the city of Thalassery that has been the cradle of Indian circus since 1950s.

viii Also known as Parishatnatakam, it was first initiated by Andhra Nataka Kala Parishat (ANKP) in 1944 to counteract the tradition of Padyanatakam (musical theatre) based on historical and mythological stories with little or no attention to political ideas or aesthetic finesse. Parishat theatre is historically formatted on theatre festivals and annual drama competitions set in realistic environments reflecting contemporary socio-political realities of the community.

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